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(54) Title: METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR PROVIDING PREDEFINED FEEDBACK

(57) Abstract: A method and apparatus utilized in operating a feedback forum in an online auction environment is described. Instead of allowing users of the system to enter free-form comments for and about other users, a number of predefined feedback comments are provided that relate to an auction transaction. Users leaving feedback for other users are permitted to select a comment they desire to leave for or about another user relative to a transaction. The predefined feedback comments selected by the users are associated with the users whom the comment is about, and at some time thereafter, the predefined feedback comment is displayed for viewing by other users of the system.

Method and Apparatus For Providing Predefined Feedback

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The invention relates generally to the art of conducting e-commerce transactions over a network. More particularly, the invention relates to a method of providing feedback between users of an e-commerce site utilizing predefined sets of comments.

Background of the Invention

The emergence of electronic commerce has revolutionized the manner in which goods and services may be bought and sold. In particular, the development of online auctions conducted over the Internet have enabled individuals to sell items with relatively little effort or expense while at the same time reaching a much larger potential pool of buyers than using more traditional means such as classified advertising and garage sales.

In a typical online auction, a seller submits an offer to sell an item, the item becomes available for bidding for a predetermined period of time. Buyers are able to view a description and often an image of the item, and submit bids. The potential buyer who tenders the highest bid "wins" the auction provided his bid is in excess of any minimum price required by the seller, and a contractual obligation is created in which the buyer and seller are required to complete the transaction.

It is the completion of the transaction, i.e., the exchange of the seller's item for the buyer's payment that is the potentially most perilous part of the transaction. More often than not, a buyer and seller are located far apart from each other, often in separate states or countries (from herein state or states unless otherwise stated shall refer to both states of the United States, as well as other countries or nations). Accordingly, the promised item and payment must be shipped via the post or some other package delivery service. A seller may request payment prior to shipping the item or the seller may require cash on delivery (COD). In either case, the buyer will not have the opportunity to verify the item was as the

seller represented it, until after payment. The item shipped may end up being broken or in worse condition than represented; or if the seller is particularly unscrupulous, a dummy item may be shipped in place of the promised item. On the reverse, where a buyer pays with a check, he may stop payment on the check shortly after receiving the item, defrauding the seller of his item. Given the geographic distance between the typical buyer and seller and the relatively small values of the items being bought and sold, it is seldom practical for the aggrieved buyer or seller to seek recourse in the courts.

In order to combat the problem of dishonest and/or unscrupulous users, online auction services such as eBay, Inc. of San Jose, California, have instituted mechanisms to combat fraudulent and dishonest practices among buyers and sellers. For instance, eBay requires each user to register with the service before offering an item for auction or bidding on an item. In order to complete registration, the user must provide either a verifiable e-mail address (i.e., one that cannot be easily set up using a pseudonym) or a credit card number. If eBay determines that a registered user is utilizing improper buying or selling practices, it can ban the user from using the auction facility in the future.

Another practice used by some auction services is to provide the buyer and seller with a feedback forum in which either user can leave comments about the other that may be of use to other users in the future in deciding whether to bid or sell from a particular user. Comments are typically positive, but a few negative comments can act to indicate a user that is not completely honest and who should be dealt with cautiously.

A representative example of a list of comments made about a user is provided in prior art Figure 1 (the e-mail addresses of the users have been masked). A score that is indicative of the user's trustworthiness with regard to online auction transactions is determined based upon the number of positive, neutral and negative comment the user has received. Comments about registered user may be entered into the system through a feedback forum or through a feedback prompt provided to the successful bidder and the auctioneer upon the conclusion of a particular auction transaction.

Prior art Figure 2 provides an example of a feedback screen that may be displayed to a user who desires to leave a comment about another user. The commenting user enters his or her ID into box 205, and his password into box 210. The ID of the user being commented on (or targeted user) is entered into box 215 and the transaction to which the comment is related is entered into box 220. The commenting user chooses the appropriate radio button as shown at 225 to indicate whether the comment is positive, neutral or

negative. A free-form text comment is left in box 230 that can be up to 80 characters long. Finally, the comment is sent to the auction service for posting by clicking the "leave comment" box 235.

Once a comment is posted about a targeted user, that user may leave a responding comment to which the commenting user may respond. Since both the buyer and the seller may leave a comment with regard to a transaction, and respond to each other's comments and subsequently respond to each other responses, a total of up to six comments may be left for any single transaction.

Each comment is typically associated with the user making the comment and the user for whom the comment is intended, as well as the transaction to which the comment relates. Each comment must be stored in the auction service's storage devices. It can be appreciated that where a large number of auctions are regularly being concluded, the amount of storage space required to store all feedback comments is very large. For example, if the maximum of six 80-character comments are left for each transaction, approximately 0.5 kilobytes of storage space is necessary to store the comments. If it is considered that a service like eBay concludes tens of millions of auctions each year and that comments about particular users are stored for years, the amount of storage space is significant.

A feedback system as described above also presents several other problems: (1) there is no efficient and convenient manner of translating comments into other languages, and (2) in certain jurisdictions, the auction service may face liability for publishing slanderous comments or comments with inappropriate content. In current feedback systems, a commenting user may leave a comment in any language he desires. For instance, a German user may purchase an item from a U.S. user and at the conclusion of the transaction, leave a comment about the U.S. user in German. This comment will have little meaning to other U.S. users who view the comments about the U.S. user unless they read German. Essentially in this situation, the feedback system, at least partially, fails in its purpose of providing useful information to auction users about other users.

Given the sheer volume of comments left each day on a large system like eBay, it is impractical to screen every comment for slanderous or libelous language before posting the comment on the system for other users to read. Accordingly, users may leave inappropriate comments for other users, which may cause the auction service which published the comment to incur civil and/or criminal liability for the comment under the laws of certain

states. For instance, the slander and libel laws of Great Britain are stricter than those in the United States, and in certain Muslim states, publishing comments containing language of an inappropriate nature may be viewed as illegal.

Summary Of The Invention

A method and apparatus utilized in operating a feedback forum wherein predefined feedback comments are provided to users of an e-commerce system are described. First, the feedback system receives a request from a first user to leave feedback concerning a second user. The feedback system generates a set of predefined feedback comments that are to be displayed to the first user, and each comment is associated with an identifier. Upon receipt of a response form the first user, the system identifies the selected predefined comment about the second user, and the system stores the indicator in a data structure that is associated with the second user.

Other features of the present invention will be apparent from the accompanying drawings and from the detailed description that follows.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is illustrated by way of example, and not by way of limitation, in the figures of the accompanying drawings and in which like reference numerals refer to similar elements and in which:

Figure 1 is a prior art illustration of a web page listing of comments about a user of an Internet-based auction service.

Figure 2 is a prior art illustration of an online feedback form that is utilized by one user to leave a comment about another user.

Figure 3 is an illustration of an exemplary computer system on which three embodiments of the invention may be practiced.

Figure 4 is an illustration of an Internet Auction Facility through which embodiments of the invention may be practiced.

Figure 5 is an illustration of an exemplary database structure for an auction facility of Figure 4.

Figures 6A and 6B are a flowcharts listing an exemplary methodology for operating a feedback forum.

Figures 7A and 7B are illustrations of a feedback form that may be used by the winner of an Internet auction to leave feedback for the seller.

Figures 8A and 8B are illustrations of a feedback form that may be used by the seller to leave feedback for the winner of an Internet auction.

Figure 9 is an illustration of a feedback form that may be used by a seller in an Internet auction to respond to a comment left about him by the winner of the auction.

Figure 10 is a flowchart illustrating an alternative methodology of operating a feedback forum that incorporates both freeform and predefined feedback comments.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A method and apparatus are described to facilitate the operation of a feedback forum in an e-commerce environment wherein comments are selected by a user from a predefined set presented to the user, for example, as a menu. Compared with prior art feedback forums, embodiments of the invention facilitate the efficient use of storage space by storing the predefined comments a minimum number of times and providing indicators or pointers within the stored user's database records the comments made about the user. In another embodiment, the predefined comment may be translated into any number of different languages, and depending on an indication of a default or preferred language of a user viewing his comments or those of another user, the comments may be provided in the default or preferred language. Finally, since the comments are predefined, they can be written to avoid liability under the slander or other laws of various states.

In the following description, for the purposes of explanation, numerous specific details are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the present invention. It will be apparent, however, to one skilled in the art that the present invention may be practiced without some of these specific details. In other instances, well-known structures and devices are shown in block diagram form.

The present invention includes various operations which will be described below. The operations of the present invention may be performed by hardware components or may be embodied in machine-executable instructions, which may be used to cause a general-purpose or special-purpose processor programmed with the instructions to perform the operations. Alternatively, the operations may be performed by a combination of hardware and software.

The present invention may be provided as a computer program product that may include a machine-readable medium having stored thereon instructions, which may be used to program a computer (or other electronic devices) to perform a process according to the present invention. The machine-readable medium may include, but is not limited to, floppy

diskettes, optical disks, CD-ROMs, and magneto-optical disks, ROMs, RAMs, EPROMs, EEPROMs, magnet or optical cards, flash memory, or other type of media/ machine-readable medium suitable for storing electronic instructions. Moreover, the present invention may also be downloaded as a computer program product, wherein the program may be transferred from a remote computer to a requesting computer by way of data signals embodied in a carrier wave or other propagation medium via a communication link (e.g., a modem or network connection).

Exemplary Computer System

Figure 3 is an example of a typical computer system upon which embodiments of the present invention may be practiced. In the various embodiments, computer system 300 may be utilized as a server on which information including feedback comments about the various users of an e-commerce system is stored. Furthermore, computer system 300 may be used by a user to participate in an Internet auction including reading and leaving feedback comments.

Computer system 300 comprises a bus or other communication means 301 for communicating information, and a processing means such as processor 302 coupled with bus 301 for processing information. Computer system 300 further comprises a random access memory (RAM), flash memory, or other dynamic storage device 304 (referred to as main memory), coupled to bus 301 for storing information and instructions to be executed by processor 302. Main memory 304 also may be used for storing temporary variables or other intermediate information during execution of instructions by processor 302. Computer system 300 may also comprise a read-only memory (ROM) and/or other static storage device 306 coupled to bus 301 for storing static information and instructions for processor 302. A data storage device 307 such as a magnetic disk or optical disk and its corresponding drive may also be coupled to computer system 300 for storing information and instructions. In some architectures, a single memory device may perform the functions of two or more of the ROM 306, the main memory 304, and the mass storage device 307. In other architectures such as might be implemented with a server, the system 300 might have multiple mass storage devices 307.

Computer system 300 can also be coupled via bus 301 to a display device 321 such as a cathode ray tube (CRT) or Liquid Crystal Display (LCD), for displaying information to an end user. Typically, an alphanumeric input device 322, including alphanumeric and other keys, may be coupled to bus 301 for communicating information and/or command selections to processor 302. Another type of user input device that may be included in the computer

system 300 is a cursor control 323, such as a mouse, a trackball, a pen in conjunction with a touch sensitive screen, or cursor direction keys for communicating direction information and command selections to processor 302 and for controlling cursor movement on display 321.

A communication device 325 may also be coupled to bus 301. The communication device 325 may include a modem, a network interface card or other well-known interface devices, such as those used for coupling to Ethernet, token ring, or other types of physical attachment for purposes of providing a communication link to support a local or wide-area network. In this manner, the computer system 300 may be coupled to a number of clients and/or servers via a conventional network infrastructure, such as the Internet.

It is appreciated that a lesser or more equipped computer system than the example described above may be desirable for certain implementations. Therefore, the configuration of computer system 300 will vary from implementation to implementation depending upon numerous factors, such as price constraints, performance requirements, technological improvements, and/or other circumstances.

It should be noted that while the operations described herein may be performed under the control of a programmed processor such as processor 302, in alternative embodiments, the operations may be fully or partially implemented by any programmable or hard-coded logic, such as Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs), TTL logic, or Application Specific Integrated Circuits (ASICs). Additionally, the method of the present invention may be performed by any combination of programmed general-purpose computer components and/or custom hardware components. Therefore, nothing disclosed herein should be construed as limiting the present invention to a particular embodiment wherein the recited steps are performed by a specific combination of hardware components.

Exemplary Internet Auction Facility

Figure 4 is a block diagram illustrating an exemplary network-based transaction facility in the form of an Internet-based auction facility 400 on which embodiments of the invention may be practiced. While exemplary embodiments of the invention are described within the context of an auction facility, it will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the invention will find application in many different types of e-commerce facilities.

The auction facility 400 includes one or more of a number of types of front-end servers, namely page servers 402 that deliver Web pages (e.g., markup language documents), picture servers 404 that dynamically deliver images to be displayed within Web pages, listing servers 406, CGI (Common Gateway Interface) or ISAPI servers 408

that provide an intelligent interface to the back-end of facility 400, and search servers 410 that handle search requests to the facility 400. E-mail servers 412 provide, *inter alia*, automated e-mail communications to users of the facility 400.

The back-end servers include a database engine server 414, a search index server 416, and a credit card database server 418, each of which maintains and facilitates access to a respective database 420, 422, 424.

The Internet-based auction facility 400 may be accessed by a client program 428 such as a browser (e.g., the Internet Explorer distributed by Microsoft Corp. of Redmond, Washington) that executes on a client machine 426 and accesses the facility 400 via a network such as, for example, the Internet 430. Other examples of networks that a client may utilize to access the auction facility 400 include a wide area network (WAN), a local area network (LAN), a wireless network (e.g., a cellular network), or the Plain Old Telephone Service (POTS) network.

Exemplary Internet Auction Database

Figure 5 is a database diagram illustrating an exemplary database 520 maintained by and accessed via the database engine server 514, which at least partially implements and supports the auction facility 400. The database 520 may, in one embodiment, be implemented as a relational database, and includes a number of tables having entries or records that are linked by indices and keys. In an alternative embodiment, the database 514 may be implemented as a collection of objects in an object-oriented database.

Central to the database 520 is a user table 500, which contains a record for each user of the auction facility 400. A user may operate as a seller, buyer, or both within the auction facility 500. The database 520 also includes item tables 502 that may be linked to the user table 500. Specifically, the item tables 502 include a seller items table 504 and a bidder items table 506. A user record in the user table 500 may be linked to multiple items that are being, or have been, auctioned via the facility 400. A link indicates whether the user is a seller or a bidder (i.e., buyer) with respect to items for which records exist within the item tables 502.

The database 414 also includes a note table 508 populated with note records that may be linked to one or more item records within the item tables 502 and/or to one or more user records within the user table 500. Each note record within the note table 508 may include, *inter alia*, a description, history or other information pertaining to an item being auctioned via the auction facility 400 or to a user of the auction facility 400.

Also linked with the user table is one or more feedback tables 512 which contain information about comments made by and about each user of the auction facility 400. It is within this set of tables that indicators that are linked to the predefined comments about a particular user are stored. Additionally, each indicator may be cross-referenced with regard to the transaction number to which the comment relates, as well as the user who made the comment.

A number of other tables may be linked to the user table 500 including, but not limited to, a user past aliases table 510, a bids table 516, an accounts table 518, an account balances table 520, and a transaction record table 522.

An Exemplary Feedback Forum Methodology

Figures 6A and 6B are flow diagrams illustrating an exemplary methodology 600 for a feedback forum in which comments may be left for users of an e-commerce system such as the Internet auction facility 400 described *supra*. It is to be noted that embodiments of the invention are not limited to application in online auction environments alone, but may be implemented in any e-commerce system in which users of the system interact.

In block 610 of Figure 6A, the Internet auction facility 400 receives a request from a user to leave feedback for another user. If the user has just concluded an auction for an item and is either the successful bidder or the seller, he is prompted when viewing the items auction web page to leave feedback for the other user(s) involved in the auction. If the user chooses the prompt, typically displayed as an icon, the Internet auction facility 400 will send the user a markup language feedback forum page for display on the user's computer as indicated in block 610. Alternatively, a user may enter proceed from any one of the Internet auction facility 400 web pages he is currently viewing into the feedback forum by clicking the appropriate icon or hypertext link.

Figures 7A and 7B are illustrations of exemplary feedback forms that may be displayed to the user from which the user may choose a comment. It is understood, however, that many types of alternative feedback forms are contemplated as would be obvious to one skilled in the art with the benefit of this disclosure.

Figure 7A is a form that may be displayed to a successful bidder. Typically, if the feedback forum is entered from an auction page for a particular item and the successful bidder is already known to the auction facility, the feedback form will be returned with most of the particulars of the auction filled in. If the bidder enters the feedback forum from another link, he may have to fill in the information in the form including his ID and

password, the targeted user's ID, and the transaction number to which the comment relates. The form may list the seller of the item as shown in blocks 710 and 723. It may list the item which was the subject of the auction as shown in 720, as well as listing the transaction number of the auction as shown in block 721. The successful bidder would be prompted to enter his user password and user ID (if not already filled in) in blocks 713 and 711 respectively. The form will include a list of predefined comments from which the bidder may pick one comment about the seller (in other embodiments more than one comment may be selected). The comments are contained within three drop-down boxes 730-732, one box containing positive comments, one box for neutral comments, and another for negative comments. In other embodiments, the predefined comments may be listed in any conceivable manner such as, but not limited to, check boxes, single drop-down boxes for all comment types, lists with radio buttons, and list boxes with scroll bars. Once the bidder has selected a comment and entered in his password, he may send the comment to the auction facility for posting by selecting the "Submit Comment" button 840.

Drop-down boxes 830-832 in their expanded form are illustrated in Figure 8B. A variety of comments are contained within each box. To maintain a level of variety, the auction facility 400 may, on a periodic basis, change the content of the comments available to a user. In some embodiments as shown in blocks 841 and 843, the comments may have fields that fill in the appropriate name of a user and/or item when displayed. Ideally, the predefined comments are written and selected by the auction facility administrators to: (1) minimize potential liability to the auction facility for slander against the target user, and (2) minimize potential criminal and civil liability for publishing language considered inappropriate by the state in which it is viewed.

Figure 8A is a form that may be displayed to a seller who has just concluded an auction. Typically, if the feedback forum is entered from an auction page for a particular item and the seller is already known to the auction facility, the feedback form will be returned with most of the particulars of the auction filled in. If the seller enters the feedback forum from another link, he may have to fill in the information in the form including his ID and password, the targeted user's ID, and the transaction number to which the comment relates. The form may list the successful bidder for the item as shown in blocks 850 and 863. It may list the item which was the subject of the auction as shown in 860, as well as listing the transaction number of the auction as shown in block 861. The successful bidder would be prompted to enter his user password and user ID (if not already

filled in) in blocks 851 and 853 respectively. The form may include a list of predefined comments from which the seller may pick one comment about the successful bidder (in other embodiments more than one comment may be selected). The comments are contained within three drop-down boxes 870-872, one box containing positive comments, one box for neutral comments, and another for negative comments. A variety of comment s may be contained within each of the boxes as shown in Figure 8B and the comments may include fields that substitute the name of the item or user when being displayed. In other embodiments, the predefined comments may be listed in any conceivable manner such as, but not limited to, check boxes, single drop-down boxes for all comment types, lists with radio buttons, and list boxes with scroll bars. Once the seller has selected a comment and entered in his password, he may send the comment to the auction facility for posting by selecting the "Submit Comment" button 880.

In one embodiment of the invention, the forms of Figures 7A and 8A including the predefined comments are displayed in a user's preferred language or a default language associated with a user. The display language may be determined based on a registered user's listed language preference, or it may be based on the language of the state associated with the site through which the user is registered. Because the comments are predefined, identical versions of the comments may be provided in a variety of language choices.

Referring to Figure 6A, after the comment is received by the Auction facility 400, it is associated with the target user in block 615. Additionally, in alternative embodiments the comment may also be associated with transaction record and/or the user making the comment. In a preferred embodiment, the comment is only stored in one or at most a few locations within mass storage of the Internet auction facility 400. In block 620, a pointer or indicator unique to the comment along with additional information relating to the user commenting and the transaction involved are stored within the targeted users database record.

After the comment has been stored with the targeted user's database record, it may be retrieved for viewing. Typically, any user of the auction facility can access a listing of comments made about a particular user through links provided throughout web pages associated with the auction facility 400. When a request is made to see the comments about a targeted user, the comment indicators stored within the targeted user's database record are retrieved. The comments associated with the indicators are then retrieved from storage as shown in block 625 in the preferred or default language of the user requesting to view the

comments. The comments are then transmitted to the user in a format similar to the format presented in prior art Figure 1 for display.

In the preferred embodiment, the targeted user may respond to a comment made about him. Figure 6B is a flow chart showing the methodology followed by an exemplary feedback forum when a target user requests to respond to a comment about him. The forum receives the request to respond in block 635. In block 640, a response comment form such as the one illustrated in Figure 8 is sent to the target user for display on his computer. If the targeted user is known (i.e., he has signed in with the auction facility), the form, the comment to which he is responding and the predefined response comment choices will all be displayed in the user's preferred language. Alternatively, the form and associated predefined comments may be displayed in the default language associated with the domain suffix of the national site through which he entered the auction facility (e.g., auctionfacility.jp.com would indicate that the form should be displayed in Japanese).

The representative response comment form as shown in Figure 9 is similar to the forms of Figures 7A and 8A except for the choices of predefined comments available to the targeted user. In a preferred embodiment, the list of predefined response comments 910 relate directly to the nature of the comment 905 made about the targeted user. For instance, if the comment left about the targeted user was that the item he sold was packaged improperly, then the response comments might respond only to the manner in which the item was packaged. Once the targeted user has chosen a response comment, he may send it to the auction facility by clicking the "Submit Response" button.

Upon receipt of the response comment choice as shown in block 645 of Figure 6B, an indicator for the response comment is linked to the comment to which it is a response and stored in the targeted user's database record in 650. At the request of a user to view the comment written about the targeted user, the response comment is retrieved from storage based on its indicator along with the related comment and displayed to the user in the language associated with the user in block 655 and 660. Typically, the response comments will be displayed next to or underneath the comment to which it relates.

In the preferred embodiment, the commenting user is given an opportunity to respond to the targeted user's response to his initial comment. The methodology involved in such a response is similar to that discussed above in reference to Figure 6B.

An Alternative Feedback Forum Methodology

In some instances, it may be desirable to retain the free-form comment methodology currently utilized in the prior art. Limiting a user's comments to only predefined choices is somewhat restrictive and may not in many cases provide the degree of information content that a free-form comment might. For example, a free-form comment expressing rage and dissatisfaction, perhaps through the use of profanity or other strong words, might act as a stronger deterrent to a prospective bidder from bidding on a product being auctioned by the user about whom the comment was left than a rather sanitized comment stating the condition of an item was less than what it was represented as.

On the other hand, any advantages that may be associated with free-form comments may be outweighed by the detrimental effects related to the content of the free-form comments. For example, the auction facility may be liable for slander to a user resident of certain jurisdictions having strict slander laws. Additionally, in certain states such as certain Islamic nations, the auction facility may be subject to civil and criminal penalties for publishing comments with content that is considered inappropriate in those states.

The Figure 10 is a flow chart of a method of operating a feedback forum in which a user is able to leave a free-form comment unless he or the target user of the comment are residents or are associated with states in which publishing free-form comments may subject the auction facility to civil or criminal liability. In Figure 10, the default behavior of the feedback forum is to allow the user to leave a free-form comment, however a feedback forum in which the default behavior allows the user to leave predefined comments is also contemplated unless it is verified the commenting user and the targeted user are from certain states.

In block 1005, the auction facility receives a request from a user to leave a comment about a targeted user. In block 1010, the auction facility system determines whether the commenting user and the targeted user are known. For instance, if the commenting user is a seller, he may click on a leave a comment button from within a transaction page for an item he has auctioned. In this case, the system would know the names of the users and the particular transaction number related to the item. Assuming the names of the users are known, the system determines whether either user is from a select set of states with strict slander or content laws in block 1015. If either user is from or associated with the select set of states, the user is sent a feedback form with predefined comment choices in block 1020. A typical form would be similar to the illustration of Figure 7A. The feedback processing

would then follow the processing as described *supra* with regard to Figures 6A and 6B as indicated in block 1025.

Referring back to block 1010, if the system is unable to verify the identities of either user as would be the case if the commenting user entered the feedback forum from a link other than the link listed on a page related to a particular auction, the user is sent the standard free-form feedback form as shown in prior art Figure 2. After the user fills out the form by entering the free-form comment, his ID and password, the ID of the target of the comment, and the item transaction number, and sends the form to the auction facility, the auction facility system determines whether either identified user is from the select set of states in block 1040. If either is, the user is sent a feedback form with predefined comment choices as illustrated in Figure 7A. If neither is from the select set of states, the comments are posted to the target user's database record for review by other users as indicated in block 1045.

Referring back to block 1015, if the neither user is from the select set of states, the Figure 2 free-form feedback form is sent to the user and is processed using prior art techniques as indicated in blocks 1050 and 1055.

In the foregoing specification, the invention has been described with reference to specific embodiments thereof. It will, however, be evident that various modifications and changes may be made thereto without departing from the broader spirit and scope of the invention. For instance, in the embodiments of the invention described above, markup language documents are utilized in the display of comments and comment selection options to the client, it is to be noted that other types of interfaces visual or audio are contemplated as would be obvious to one skilled in the art. Furthermore, the embodiments have been described in terms of an auction facility, however it is contemplated that the feedback forum might be utilized in other types of e-commerce forums where information about users of the system would be useful. The specification and drawings are, accordingly, to be regarded in an illustrative rather than a restrictive sense.

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method of operating an online feedback forum comprising:

receiving a request from a first user to leave feedback about a second user;

generating a set of predefined feedback comments to be displayed to the user, each predefined feedback comment of the menu of predefined feedback comments associated with an indicator;

identifying a predefined feedback comment from the set of predefined feedback comments as having been selected by the first user; and

storing an indicator associated with the predefined feedback comment in a data structure associated with the second user.

2. The method of claim 1 further comprising, retrieving the predefined feedback comments from storage based upon the associated indicator responsive to a request received from a requestor.

3. The method of claim 2 further comprising, communicating the predefined feedback comments to the requestor.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the request from the first user is received at a server machine via a communications network.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the generating of the set of predefined feedback comments includes generating a markup language document to display the set of predefined feedback comments.

6. The method of claim 5, wherein the markup language documents is to display the set of predefined feedback comments as a menu.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein the menu comprises any one of a group of menus including a drop-down menu, a radio-button menu and a check-box menu.

8. The method of claim 1, wherein said identifying of the predefined feedback comment includes receiving a communication from a client machine at a server machine responsive to a selection of the predefined feedback comment utilizing a markup language document.

9. The method of claim 3, wherein said communicating of the predefined feedback comment includes transmitting the predefined feedback comment from a server machine over a communications network to a client machine of the requestor.

10. The method of claim 3, wherein said communicating of the predefined feedback comment includes generating a markup language document including the predefined feedback comment at a server machine and transmitting the markup language document to the requestor via a communications network.

11. The method of claim 2, including receiving a request from a requestor to view feedback associated with the second user, and wherein said retrieving the predefined feedback comment is in response to a request by a requestor to view feedback associated with the second user.

12. The method of claim 1, wherein the set of predefined feedback comments relate to an online transaction for goods or services.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein the online transaction is facilitated by an auction.

14. The method of claim 3, further comprising:

generating a set of predefined feedback responses to be displayed to the second user, the predefined feedback responses available in the set of predefined responses based upon the content of the predefined feedback comment, each predefined feedback response of the set of predefined feedback responses associated with a response indicator;

detecting selection of a predefined feedback response by the second user from the set of predefined responses; and

storing the response indicator associated with the predefined response in a data structure associated with the first user.

15. The method of claim 14, further comprising retrieving the predefined feedback response from storage responsive to a second request received from a second requestor.

16. The method of claim 15, further comprising communicating the predefined feedback response to the second requestor.

17. The method of claim 1, wherein the set of predefined feedback comments is distributed among several lists, a first list comprising negative comments, a second list comprising neutral comments, and the third list comprising positive comments.

18. The method of claim 3, wherein the language in which the predefined feedback comment is communicated to the requestor is based on information associated with the requestor.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein the information includes the national site through which the requestor is registered.

20. The method of claim 18, wherein the information includes the requestor's place of residence.

21. The method of claim 18, wherein the information includes the requestor's preferred language.

22. A method of operating a feedback system comprising:
receiving a request from a first user to leave feedback about a second user;
retrieving a set of predefined feedback comments in a first language and
communicating the set to the first user;
identifying a predefined feedback comment from the set of predefined feedback
comments as having been selected by the first user; and

communicating the predefined feedback comment to a requesting user in a second language.

23. The method of claim 22, wherein the requesting user receives the predefined feedback comment after selecting an appropriate link on his display.

24. The method of claim 22, further comprising:

upon identification of the predefined feedback comment, identifying a predefined feedback response to the predefined feedback comment from a set of predefined feedback responses as having been selected by the second user, the set of predefined feedback responses having been retrieved and communicated to second user in the second language.

25. The method of claim 24, wherein the set of predefined feedback responses communicated to the second user is based upon the content of the predefined feedback comment.

26. The method of claim 22, wherein the predefined feedback comment is in relation to a transaction conducted by way of an auction conducted over a network.

27. The method of claim 22, wherein the first language is based upon information about the first user.

28. The method of claim 27, wherein the information is the national site at which the first user is registered.

29. The method of claim 27, wherein the information is the registered address of the first user.

30. The method of claim 22, wherein the request from the first user is received at a server machine via a communications network.

31. The method of claim 22, wherein said retrieving a set of predefined feedback comments includes generating a markup language document in the first language to display the set of predefined feedback comments.

32. The method of claim 31, wherein the markup language documents is to display the set of predefined feedback comments as a menu.

33. The method of claim 32, wherein the menu comprises any one of a group of menus including a drop-down menu, a radio-button menu and a check-box menu.

34. The method of claim 22, wherein said identifying a predefined feedback comment includes receiving a communication from a client machine at a server machine responsive to a selection of the predefined feedback comment utilizing a markup language document.

35. The method of claim 22, wherein said communicating the predefined feedback comment includes transmitting the predefined feedback comment from a server machine over a communications network to a client machine of the requestor.

36. The method of claim 22, wherein said communicating the predefined feedback comment includes generating a markup language document including the predefined feedback comment at a server machine and transmitting the markup language document to the requestor via a communications network.

37. A method of operating an online feedback system comprising:
receiving a request from a first user to leave feedback about a second user;
determining whether to communicate to the first user a prompt to enter a freeform feedback comment or to communicate a set of predefined feedback comments based on information about either the first or second user;
retrieving a set of predefined feedback comments and communicating the set of predefined feedback comments to the first user;
identifying a predefined feedback comment from the set of predefined feedback comments selected by the first user;
communicating the selected predefined feedback comment to a requesting user.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein said determining whether to communicate to the first user a prompt to enter a freeform feedback comment or to communicate a set of predefined feedback comments, the information about either the first or second user includes the national site through which the first or second user is registered.

39. The method of claim 37, wherein said determining whether to communicate to the first user a prompt to enter a freeform feedback comment or to communicate a set of predefined feedback comments, the information about either the first or second user includes the domicile or residence of the first or second user.

40. The method of claim 37, wherein said determining whether to communicate to the first user a prompt to enter a freeform comment or to communicate a set of predefined feedback comments further comprises choosing to display the set of predefined feedback comments if the information about either the first or second user indicates an association with a predefined group of states.

41. The method of claim 37, wherein the predefined group of states is states identified as having strict laws relating to published content.

42. The method of claim 37, wherein the predefined group of states is states identified as having strict slander laws.

43. The method of claim 37, wherein the request from the first user is received at a server machine via a communications network.

44. The method of claim 37, wherein said retrieving a set of predefined feedback comments includes generating a markup language document to display the set of predefined feedback comments.

45. The method of claim 44, wherein the markup language document is to display the set of predefined feedback comments as a menu.

46. The method of claim 45, wherein the menu comprises any one of a group of menus including a drop-down menu, a radio-button menu and a check-box menu.

47. The method of claim 37, wherein said identifying a predefined feedback comment includes receiving a communication from a client machine at a server machine responsive to a selection of the predefined feedback comment utilizing a markup language document.

48. The method of claim 37, wherein said communicating the selected predefined feedback comment includes transmitting the predefined feedback comment from a server machine over a communications network to a client machine of the requestor.

49. The method of claim 3, wherein said communicating of the predefined feedback comment includes generating a markup language document including the predefined feedback comment at a server machine and transmitting the markup language document to the requestor via a communications network.

50. Machine-readable media for storing data comprising:

a data structure including,

a directory of a plurality of predefined feedback comments, the content of the plurality of predefined feedback comments relating to interactions and transactions that may occur between registered users of an e-commerce system,

a database record for each registered user, the database record for each registered user comprising a link to each of the plurality of predefined feedback comments associated with the registered user as provided by other registered users.

51. The machine-readable media of claim 50, wherein the plurality of predefined feedback comments are stored in a plurality of language translations.

52. The machine-readable media of claim 50, further comprising directories of predefined feedback responses to the plurality of predefined feedback comments, each predefined feedback response of the plurality of predefined feedback responses associated with each predefined feedback comment with which the predefined feedback response relates.

53. An e-commerce facility comprising:

at least one processor; and

one or more data storage devices with,

(1) a directory stored thereon of predefined feedback comments having content related to transactions that may be conducted on the e-commerce facility,

(2) a database stored thereon including a plurality of records about a plurality of registered users, all stored thereon, and

(3) processor-executable instructions stored thereon, which when executed cause at least one processor to:

receive a request from a first registered user of the plurality of users to leave feedback about a second registered user of the plurality of users,

communicate to the first user a set of predefined feedback comments from the directory of predefined feedback comments,

identify a predefined feedback comment from the menu of predefined feedback comments selected by the first user;

store an indicator associated with a selected predefined feedback comment in a feedback record of the plurality of records associated with the second user,

retrieve the selected predefined feedback comment from the directory of predefined feedback comments based upon the indicator, and

send the predefined feedback comment to a requestor.

54. The e-commerce facility of claim 53, wherein the transactions are facilitated by an auction over a network.

55. The e-commerce facility of claim 53, wherein at least one predefined feedback comment within the directory of predefined feedback comments is stored in multiple language translations.

56. The e-commerce facility of claim 55, wherein said processor operation to retrieve the selected predefined feedback comment includes the determination of what language translation of the selected predefined feedback comment to retrieve based on a language indicator stored in the record associated with the requestor.

57. The e-commerce facility of claim 53, wherein the e-commerce facility is a server and the request from a registered user is received via a communications network.

58. The e-commerce facility of claim 53, wherein said instruction to communicate to the first user the set of predefined feedback comments includes an instruction to generate a markup language document to display the set of predefined feedback comments.

59. The e-commerce facility of claim 58, wherein the markup language document is configured to display the set of predefined feedback comments as a menu.

60. The e-commerce facility of claim 59, wherein the menu comprises any one of a group of menus including a drop down menu, a radio-button menu, and a check-box menu.

61. The method of claim 58, wherein said instruction to identify the predefined feedback comment includes an instruction to receive a communication from a client machine at a server machine responsive to a selection of the predefined feedback comment utilizing a markup language document.

62. The method of claim 22, wherein said instruction to communicate the predefined feedback comment includes an instruction to transmit the predefined feedback comment from a server machine over a communications network to a client machine of the requestor.

63. A machine-readable medium having stored thereon data representing sequences of instructions, and the sequences of instructions which, when executed by a processor, cause the processor to:

receive a request from a first registered user of the plurality of users to leave feedback about a second registered user of the plurality of users,

communicate to the first user a set of predefined feedback comments from the directory of predefined feedback comments,

identify a predefined feedback comment from the menu of predefined feedback comments selected by the first user; and

store an indicator associated with a selected predefined feedback comment in a feedback record of the plurality of records associated with the second user.

64. The machine readable medium of claim 63, having stored thereon data representing sequences of instructions, and the sequences of instructions which, when executed by a processor, further cause the processor to:

retrieve the selected predefined feedback comment from the directory of predefined feedback comments based upon the indicator, and

send the predefined feedback comment to a requestor.

65. The method of claim 63, wherein said instruction to receive a request from a first registered user includes instructions to generate a markup language document to display the set of predefined feedback comments.

66. The method of claim 65, wherein the markup language document is to display the set of predefined feedback comments as a menu.

67. The method of claim 66, wherein the menu comprises any one of a group of menus including a drop-down menu, a radio-button menu and a check-box menu.

68. The method of claim 63, wherein said instruction to identify a predefined feedback comment includes instructions to receive a communication from a client machine at a server machine responsive to a selection of the predefined feedback comment utilizing a markup language document.

69. The method of claim 64, wherein said instruction to communicate the selected predefined feedback comment includes instructions to transmit the predefined feedback comment from a server machine over a communications network to a client machine of the requestor.

70. The method of claim 64, wherein said instruction to send the predefined feedback comment includes instruction to generate a markup language document including the predefined feedback comment a server machine and to transmit the markup language document to the requestor via a communications network.

71. A method of operating an online feedback forum comprising:

generating a request to leave feedback regarding a user;

receiving a set of predefined feedback comments, each predefined feedback comment of the set of predefined feedback comments associated with an indicator;

detecting a selection of a predefined feedback comment from the set of predefined feedback comments; and

communicating the predefined feedback comment to be stored and associated with the user.

72. A method of enabling an online feedback forum comprising:

receiving a request to leave feedback regarding a user from a client, and transmitting the request to a server;

receiving a set of predefined feedback comments from the server, each predefined feedback comment of the set of predefined feedback comments associated with an indicator, and communicating the set to the client;

receiving a selection of a predefined feedback comment from the set of predefined feedback comments from the client, and communicating the selection to a server, the server to store the predefined feedback comment as being associated with a further user.

Overall profile makeup

52 positives. 52 are from unique users and count toward the final rating.

0 neutrals. 0 are from users no longer registered.

0 negatives. 0 are from unique users and count toward the final rating.

EBAY ID CARD user_address@aol.com (52)

Member since Wednesday, Aug 25, 1999 ☆ me

Summary of Most Recent Comments

	Past 7 days	Past month	Past 6 mo.
Positive	2	17	36
Neutral	0	0	0
Negative	0	0	0
Total	2	17	36
Bid Retractions	0	0	0

Auctions by user_address@aol.com

You can leave feedback for this user. Visit the Feedback Forum for more info on feedback profiles.

If you are user_address@aol.com (52) ☆me, you can respond to comments in this Feedback Profile.

Items 1-25 of 52 total

« | » [2] [3] (next page)

User: buyer_address@jps.com (33) ☆ Date: Jul-11-00 13:53:24 PDT Item: 370125031
Praise: High quality item, shipped promptly, I recommend flyupdown highly AAA+++

User: buyer_address@aol.com (19) ☆ Date: Jul-07-00 23:02:35 PDT Item: 366157755
Praise: Good communication. fast service. excellent product. Very satisfied!

User: buyer_address@edge.net (8) Date: Jul-04-00 19:39:16 PDT Item: 358259551
Praise: Fast shipment, Great doing business with!

User: buyer_address2@aol.com (17) ☆ Date: Jun-30-00 10:40:48 PDT Item: 318190404
Praise: Great seller...Delivered as advertised.....A+++

FIG. 1
PRIOR ART

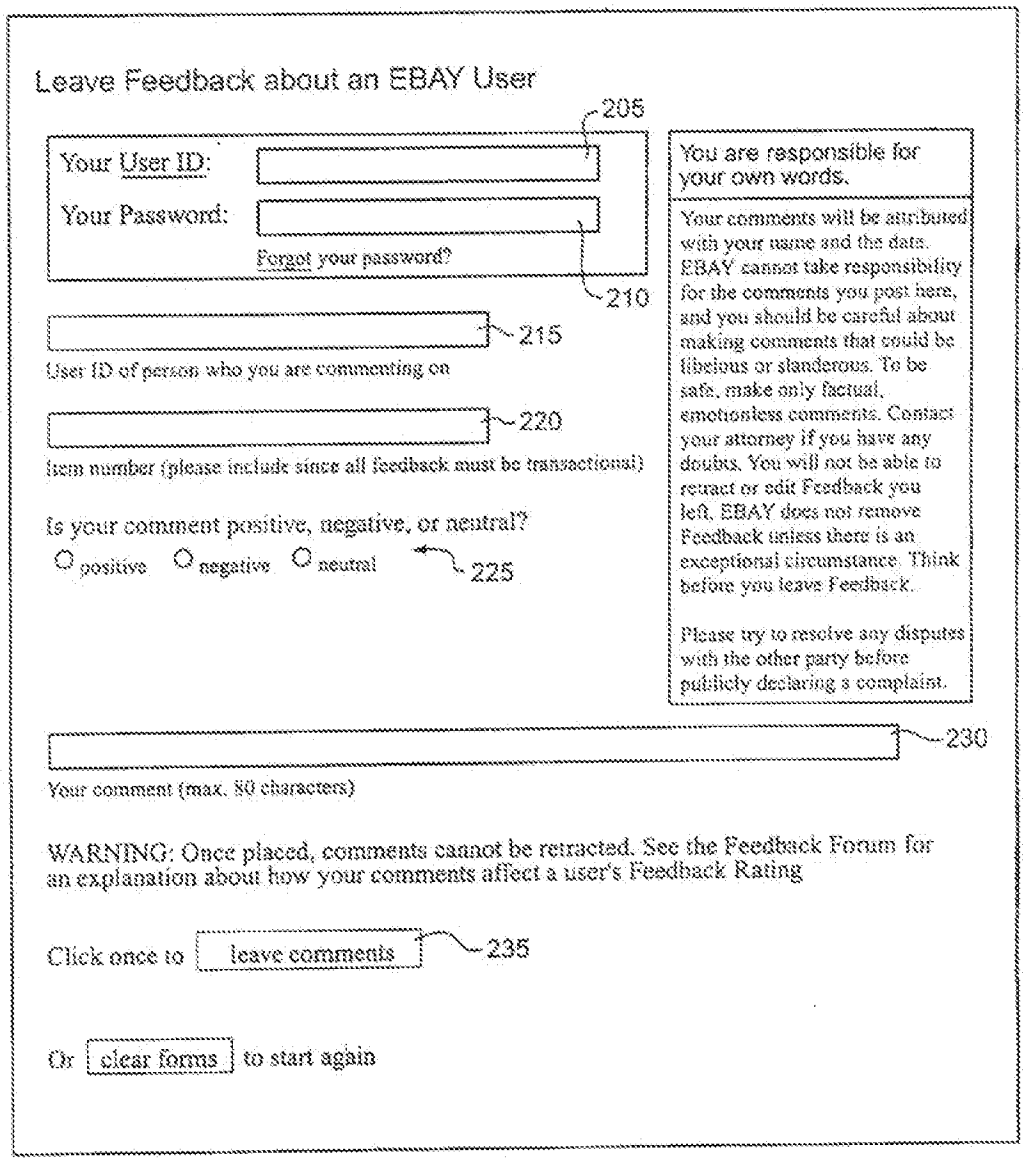


FIG. 2
PRIOR ART

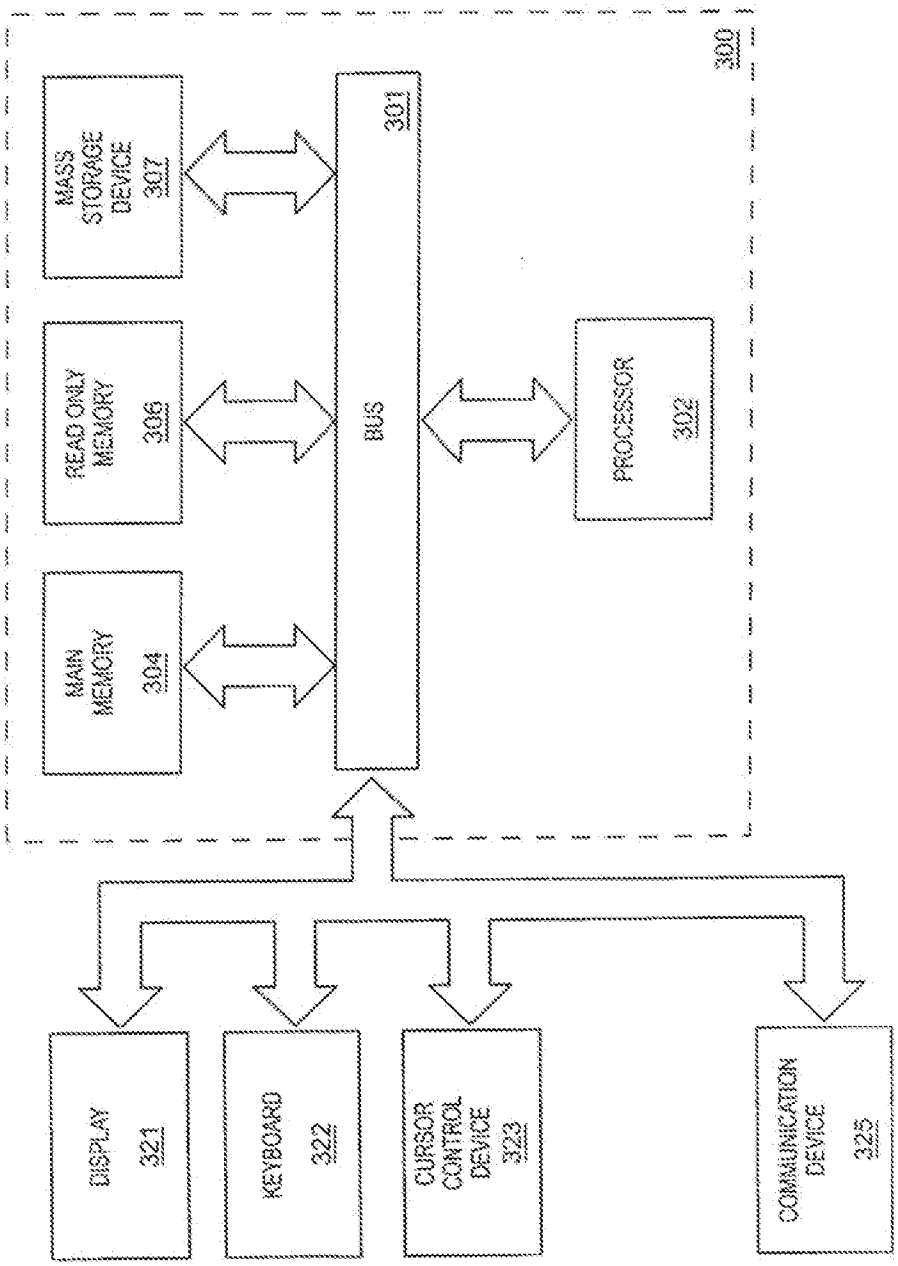

300
MASS STORAGE DEVICE 307
301
READ ONLY MEMORY 306
BUS
PROCESSOR 302
MAIN MEMORY 304
DISPLAY 321
KEYBOARD 322
CURSOR CONTROL DEVICE 323
COMMUNICATION DEVICE 325

FIG. 3

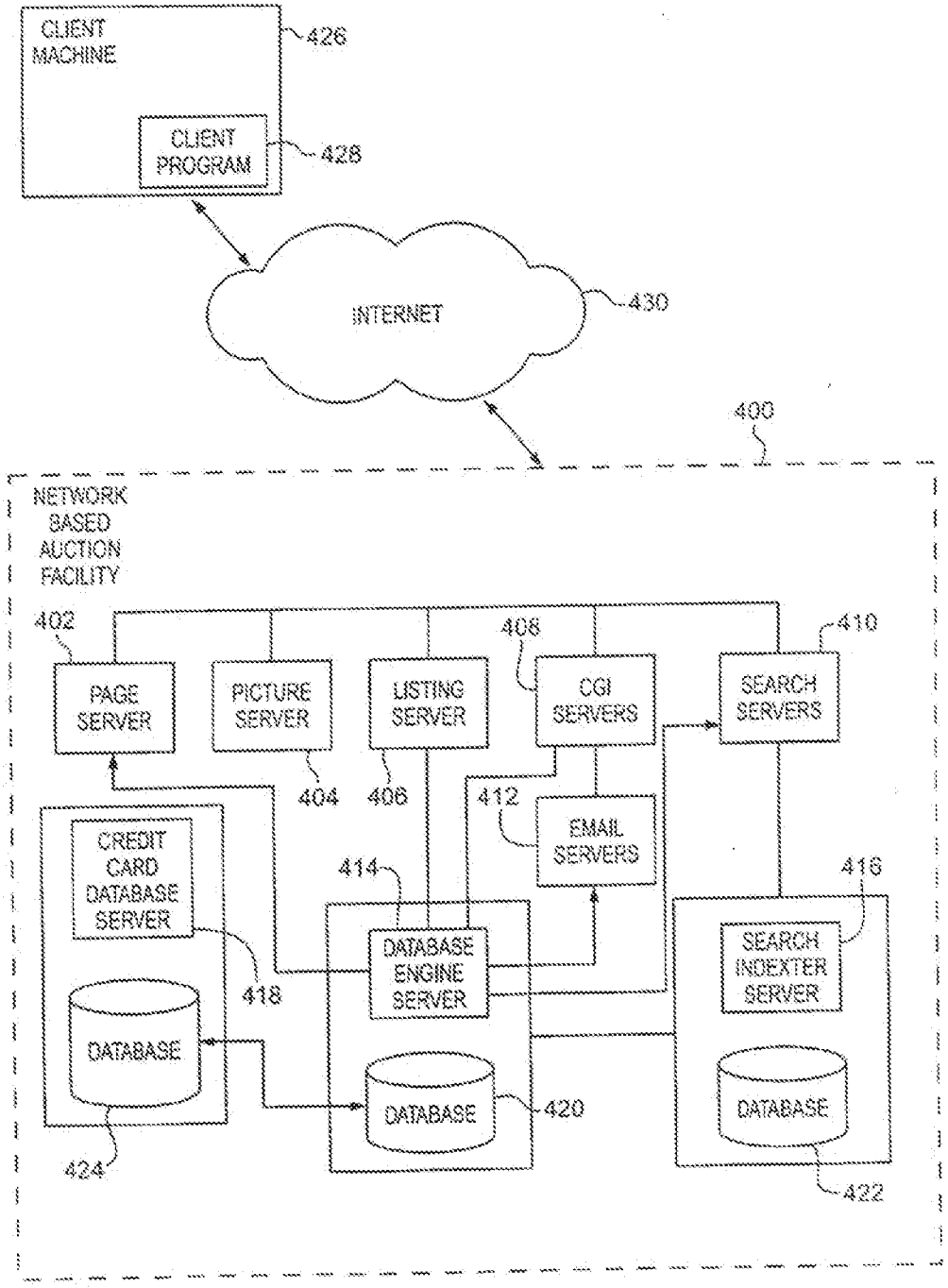

CLIENT MACHINE
426
CLIENT PROGRAM
428
INTERNET
430
400
NETWORK BASED AUCTION FACILITY
402
PAGE SERVER
PICTURE SERVER
404
LISTING SERVER
406
408
CGI SERVERS
410
SEARCH SERVERS
412
EMAIL SERVERS
414
DATABASE ENGINE SERVER
416
SEARCH INDEXTER SERVER
CREDIT CARD DATABASE SERVER
418
DATABASE
424
DATABASE
420
DATABASE
422

FIG. 4

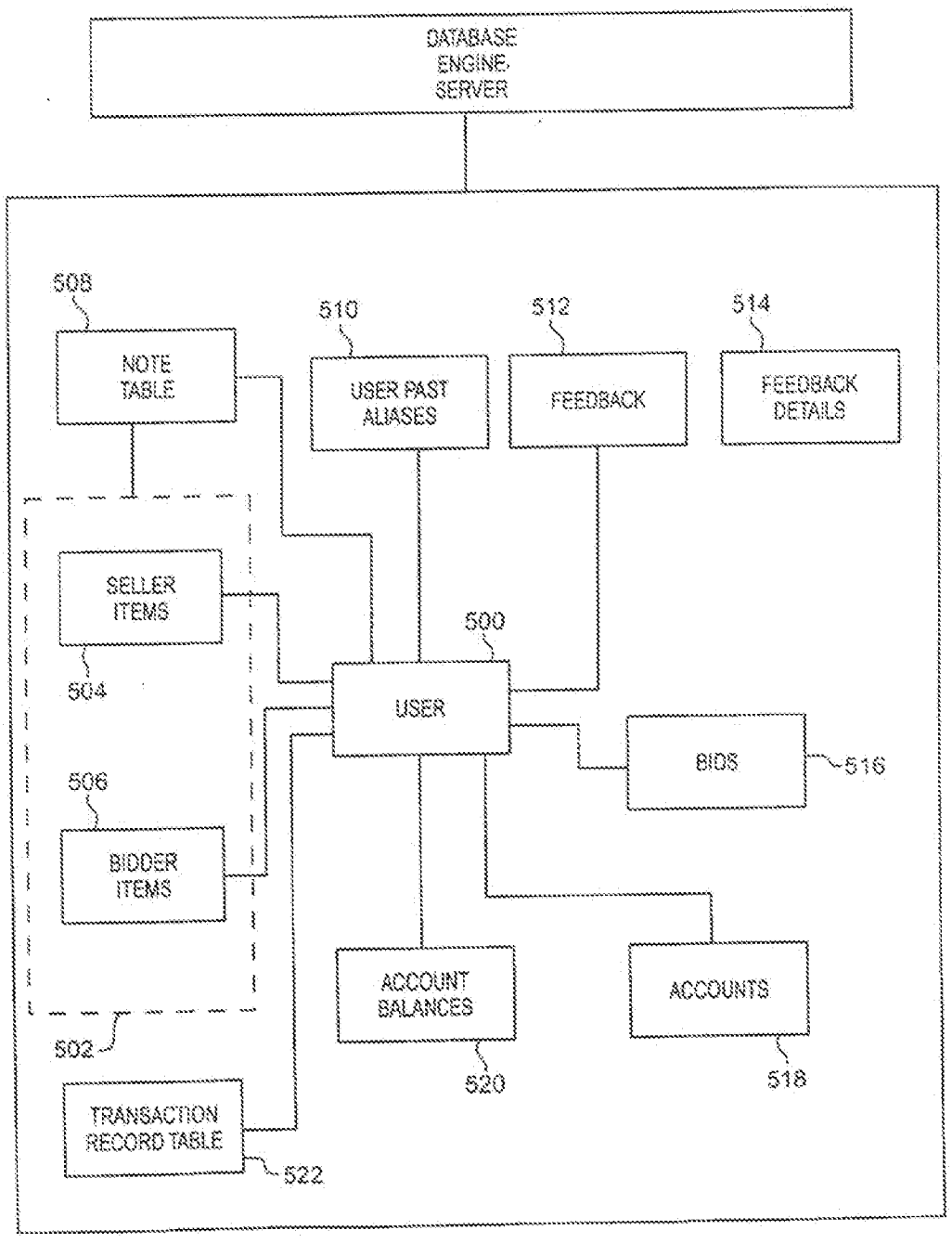

DATABASE ENGINE SERVER
508
NOTE TABLE
510
USER PAST ALIASES
512
FEEDBACK
514
FEEDBACK DETAILS
SELLER ITEMS
504
500
USER
BIDS
516
506
BIDDER ITEMS
ACCOUNT BALANCES
520
ACCOUNTS
518
502
TRANSACTION RECORD TABLE
522

FIG. 5

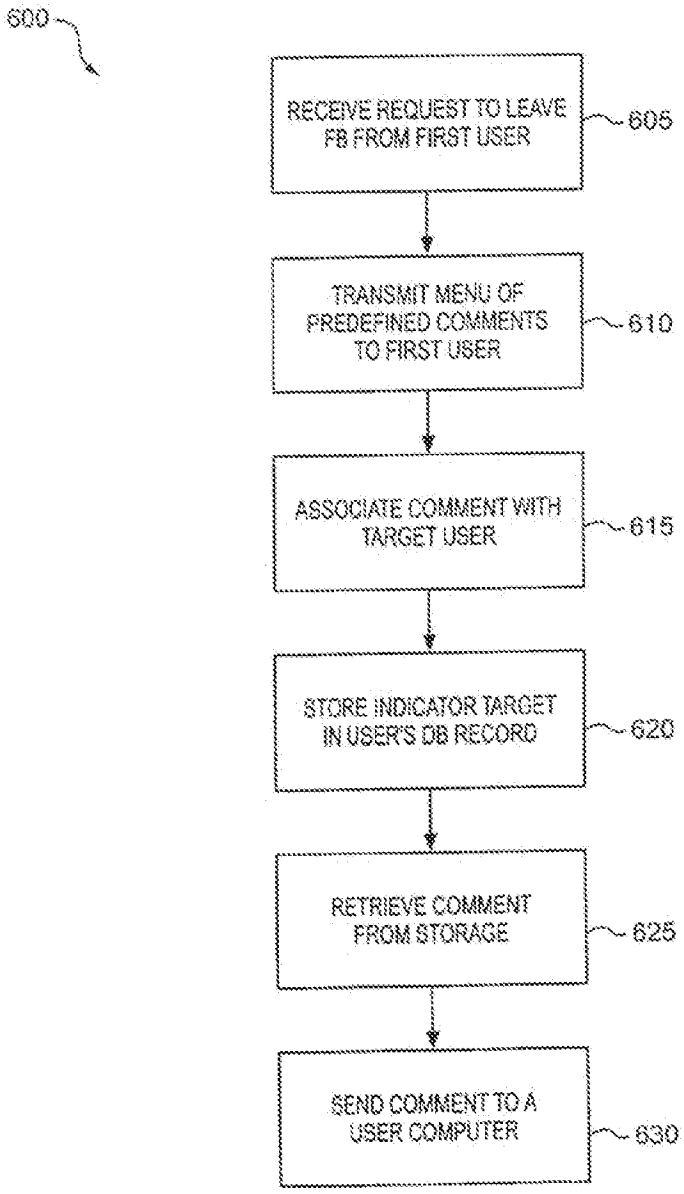

600
RECEIVE REQUEST TO LEAVE FB FROM FIRST USER
605
TRANSMIT MENU OF PREDEFINED COMMENTS TO FIRST USER
610
ASSOCIATE COMMENT WITH TARGET USER
615
STORE INDICATOR TARGET IN USER'S DB RECORD
620
RETRIEVE COMMENT FROM STORAGE
625
SEND COMMENT TO A USER COMPUTER
630

FIG. 6A

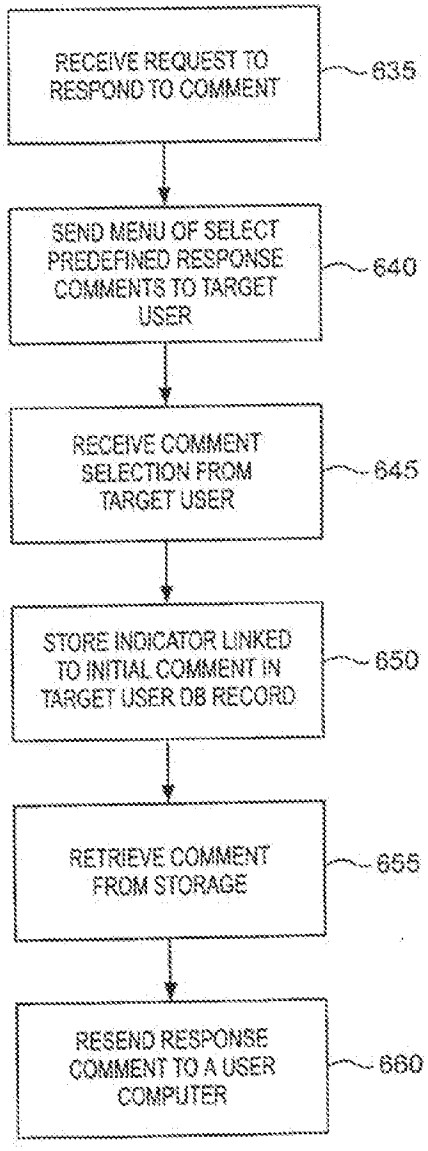

RECEIVE REQUEST TO RESPOND TO COMMENT
635
SEND MENU OF SELECT PREDEFINED RESPONSE COMMENTS TO TARGET USER
640
RECEIVE COMMENT SELECTION FROM TARGET USER
645
STORE INDICATOR LINKED TO INITIAL COMMENT IN TARGET USER DB RECORD
650
RETRIEVE COMMENT FROM STORAGE
655
RESEND RESPONSE COMMENT TO A USER COMPUTER
660

FIG. 6B

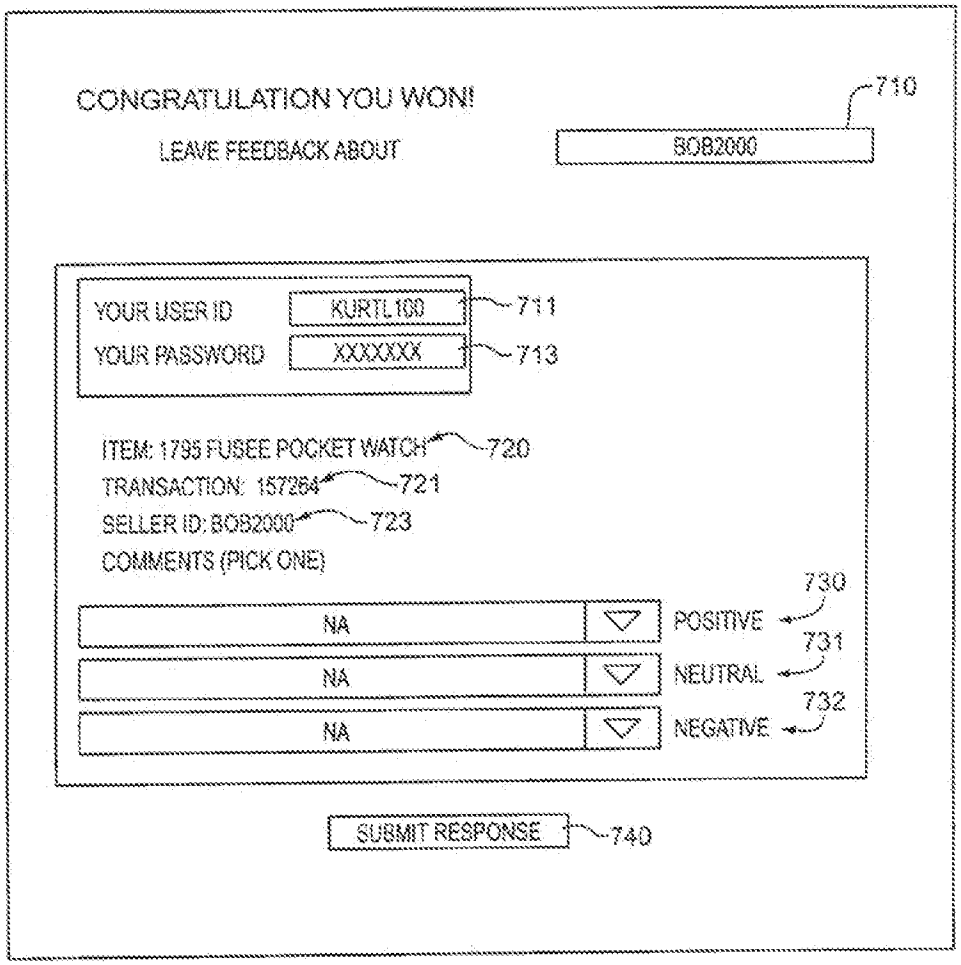

CONGRATULATION YOU WON!
710
LEAVE FEEDBACK ABOUT
BOB2000
YOUR USER ID
KURTL100
711
YOUR PASSWORD
XXXXXX
713
ITEM: 1795 FUSEE POCKET WATCH
720
TRANSACTION: 157264
721
SELLER ID: BOB2000
723
COMMENTS (PICK ONE)
730
NA
POSITIVE
731
NA
NEUTRAL
732
NA
NEGATIVE
SUBMIT RESPONSE
740

FIG. 7A

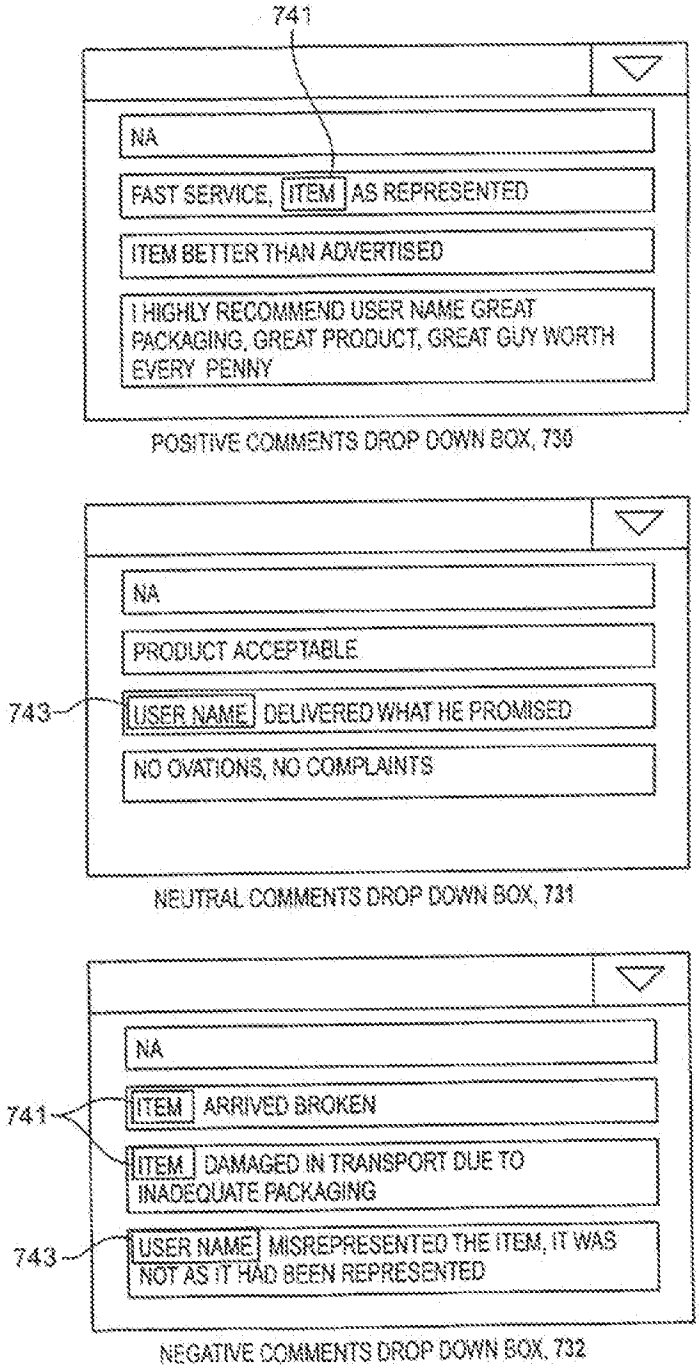

741
NA
FAST SERVICE, ITEM AS REPRESENTED
ITEM BETTER THAN ADVERTISED
I HIGHLY RECOMMEND USER NAME GREAT PACKAGING, GREAT PRODUCT, GREAT GUY WORTH EVERY PENNY
POSITIVE COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX, 730
NA
PRODUCT ACCEPTABLE
743
USER NAME DELIVERED WHAT HE PROMISED
NO OVATIONS, NO COMPLAINTS
NEUTRAL COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX, 731
NA
741
ITEM ARRIVED BROKEN
ITEM DAMAGED IN TRANSPORT DUE TO INADEQUATE PACKAGING
743
USER NAME MISREPRESENTED THE ITEM, IT WAS NOT AS IT HAD BEEN REPRESENTED
NEGATIVE COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX, 732

FIG. 7B

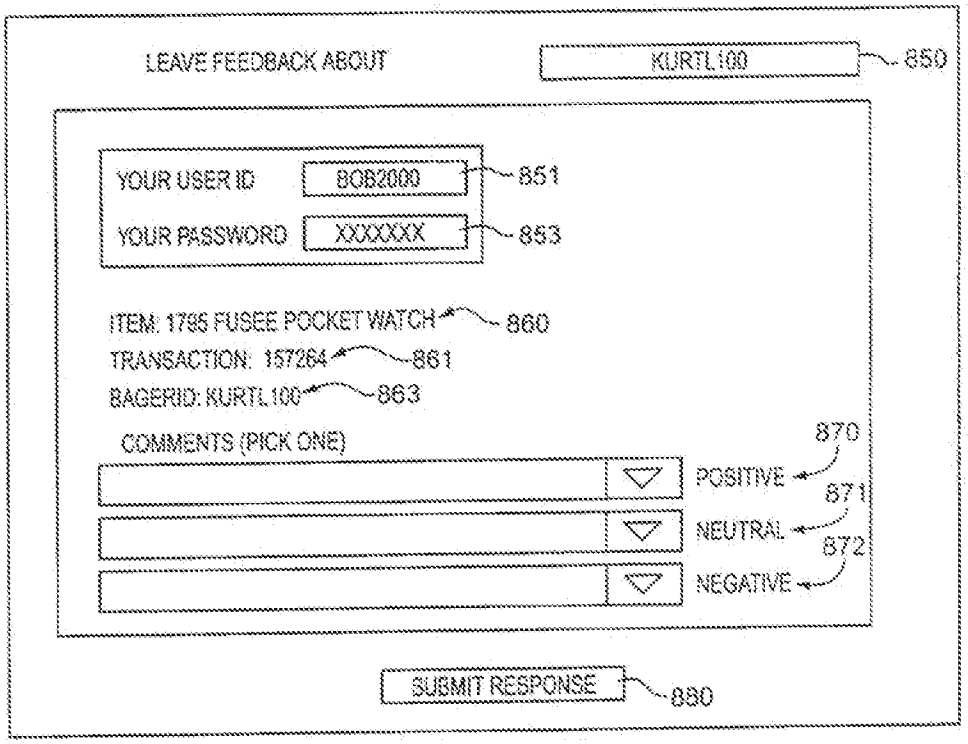

LEAVE FEEDBACK ABOUT
KURTL100
850
YOUR USER ID
BOB2000
851
YOUR PASSWORD
XXXXXX
853
ITEM: 1795 FUSEE POCKET WATCH
860
TRANSACTION: 157264
861
BAGERID: KURTL100
863
COMMENTS (PICK ONE)
870
POSITIVE
871
NEUTRAL
872
NEGATIVE
SUBMIT RESPONSE
880

FIG. 8A

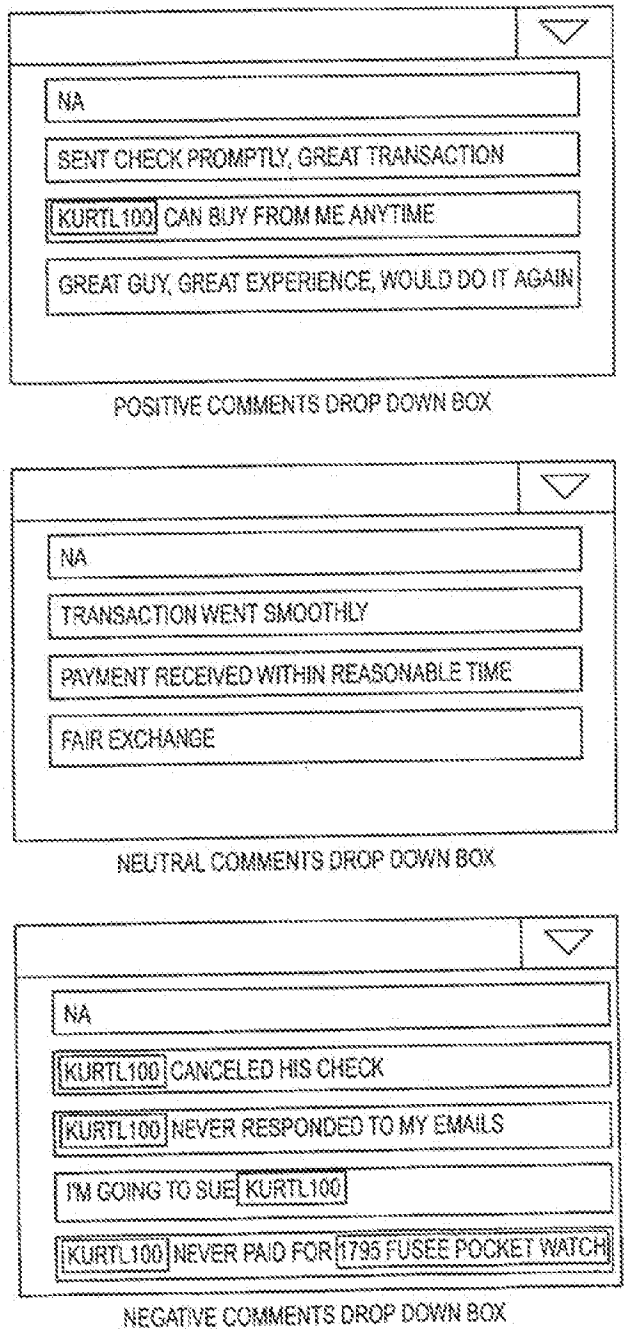
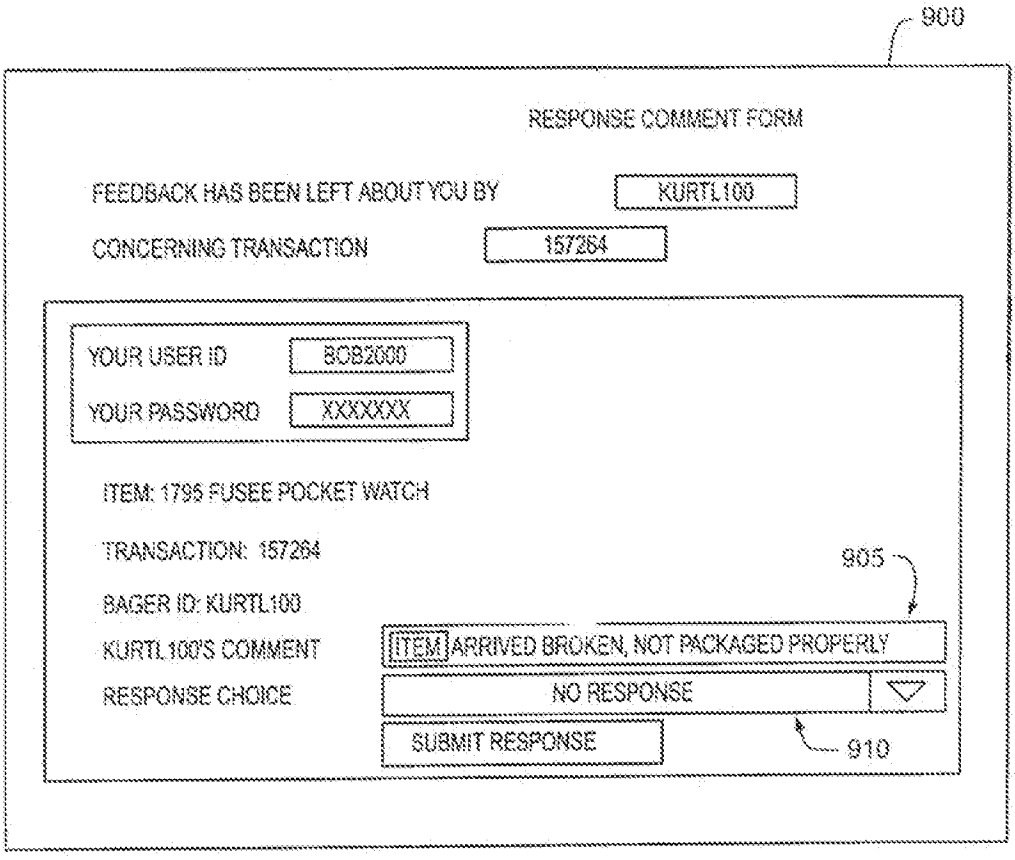
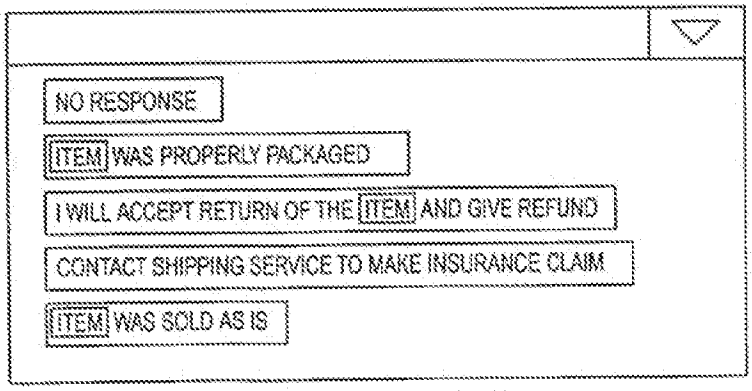

NA
SENT CHECK PROMPTLY, GREAT TRANSACTION
KURTL100 CAN BUY FROM ME ANYTIME
GREAT GUY, GREAT EXPERIENCE, WOULD DO IT AGAIN
POSITIVE COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX
NA
TRANSACTION WENT SMOOTHLY
PAYMENT RECEIVED WITHIN REASONABLE TIME
FAIR EXCHANGE
NEUTRAL COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX
NA
KURTL100 CANCELED HIS CHECK
KURTL100 NEVER RESPONDED TO MY EMAILS
I'M GOING TO SUE KURTL100
KURTL100 NEVER PAID FOR 1795 FUSEE POCKET WATCH
NEGATIVE COMMENTS DROP DOWN BOX

FIG. 8B





RESPONSE CHOICE COMMENT BOX, 910

FIG. 9

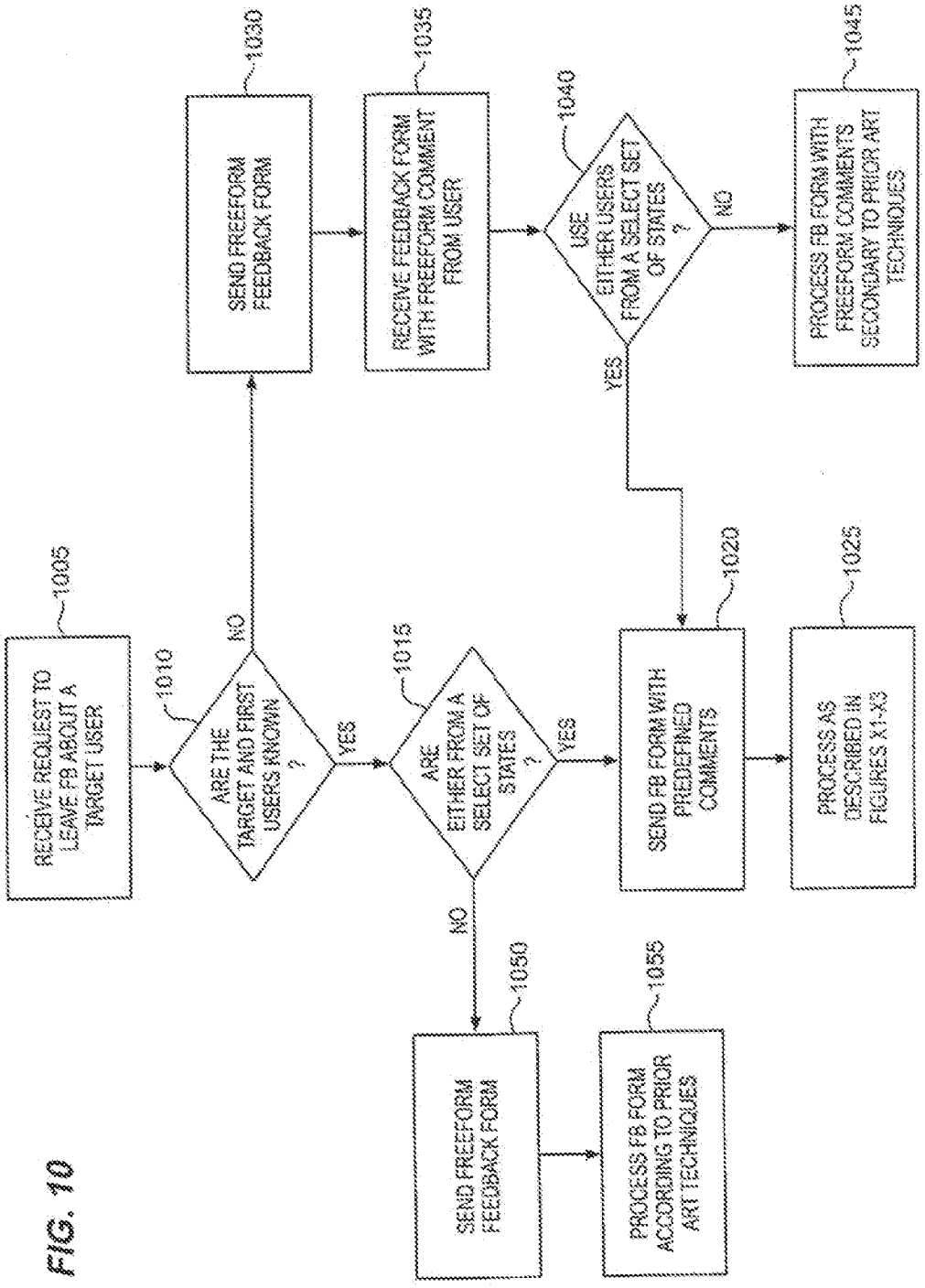

1005
RECEIVE REQUEST TO LEAVE FB ABOUT A TARGET USER
1010
ARE THE TARGET AND FIRST USERS KNOWN ?
NO
YES
1015
ARE EITHER FROM A SELECT SET OF STATES ?
NO
YES
1020
SEND FB FORM WITH PREDEFINED COMMENTS
1025
PROCESS AS DESCRIBED IN FIGURES X1-X3
1030
SEND FREEFORM FEEDBACK FORM
1035
RECEIVE FEEDBACK FORM WITH FREEFORM COMMENT FROM USER
1040
USE EITHER USERS FROM A SELECT SET OF STATES ?
NO
YES
1045
PROCESS FB FORM WITH FREEFORM COMMENTS SECONDARY TO PRIOR ART TECHNIQUES
1050
SEND FREEFORM FEEDBACK FORM
1055
PROCESS FB FORM ACCORDING TO PRIOR ART TECHNIQUES

FIG. 10